

VZCZCXRO1698
RR RUEHLMC
DE RUEHLM #0025/01 0080935
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 080935Z JAN 07
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5071
INFO RUCPDOG/USDOC WASHDC
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0436
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 9748
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 6686
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 4752
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 2099
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 7250
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1661
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHDC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000025

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DOL/ILAB FOR TINA MCCARTER

DRL/IL FOR LAUREN HOLT

STATE FOR SCA/INS

MCC FOR S GROFF, D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

GENEVA PASS USTR

E.O 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [EIND](#) [ETRD](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA'S UNIVERSITY SYSTEM FAILING TO MEET STUDENT AND
BUSINESS COMMUNITY NEEDS

11. SUMMARY: Sri Lanka's government-run university system is able to accommodate about 15 percent of eligible secondary school graduates, and the population of potential students is growing much faster than the universities can expand. The University Grants Commission (UGC), a government body, decides which students will go to which universities and what they should study. The majority of Sri Lankan university students study in Sinhala or Tamil, languages that are of limited use in today's business world. However, there is little demand for privatization of the tertiary education system. Current Sri Lankan students oppose the establishment of private schools in Sri Lanka because they fear that these students will be considered superior, thereby increasing competition for jobs. In the meantime, students attending the highly politicized state-run universities lack important leadership and communication skills, and employers in Sri Lanka and abroad prefer students who have studied elsewhere.
End Summary.

Too Few Opportunities for Sri Lankan Youth

12. Sri Lanka's government run university system is only able to accommodate about 15 percent of eligible high school graduates. Each year 200,000 students sit for the A-Level exams (closest equivalents being the SAT and ACT tests in the U.S.). Around 118,000 typically pass the A-Level exams, but only 35,000 are allowed to apply for university admission. The country's 14 universities are able to enroll just over 17,000 students per year. The population of potential students is growing much faster than the universities can expand. In 2005, 2000 students were added to state universities, but 2006 saw an increase of only 350. Universities are entirely government funded, and there is little money available to upgrade facilities, improve technology, or expand capacity. After the 15 percent admission to state universities, only another two percent of students who pass the A-level exams are able to study abroad, leaving the vast majority (83 percent) of eligible university candidates without access to higher education.

----- Restrictive Application Process -----

¶3. The UGC, established in 1979, distributes public funds to universities, serves as the central admission agency for undergraduate studies, maintains academic standards, and implements national education policies. In practice, the UGC decides which students will go to which universities, and what they should study. Only about 10 percent of students get what they request, and the rest are assigned to programs and schools according to their A-Level test scores and their home district. Disadvantaged areas get a larger quota of students and can qualify for admission with lower scores than Colombo students. Least-developed areas are given special preference. According to the Chairman of the UGC, ethnicity is not considered when deciding which students will go to which universities. The one exception to this rule is the Jaffna campus, currently closed for security reasons, which only Tamil-speaking students attend. Students who fail to gain admission are allowed to retake their A-Level exams and reapply up to three times.

----- Insufficient English Instruction -----

¶4. Prior to 1959, all university level instruction was in English. Now, the majority of Sri Lankan university students study in Sinhala or Tamil, languages that open few doors in today's business world. The exception is Peradeniya University near Kandy, where English is still used. There has been some movement recently to increase the use of English in schools. In the past few years, the University of Colombo has turned toward teaching social science courses in English and requiring one year of intensive English for incoming students.

COLOMBO 00000025 002 OF 003

Students are eager for English instruction because it increases their competitiveness in the job market. However, after two generations of minimal English instruction at all education levels, Sri Lanka's English teaching capacity is significantly impaired.

----- Little Progress Toward Privatization -----

¶5. According to the Chairman of the UGC, there is no movement toward privatizing the tertiary education system. He explained that there is little demand for private education, as education is the only ladder in Sri Lanka for upward mobility, and people expect it to be provided by the Government. In addition to tuition, the GSL pays stipends to about 80 percent of students to cover living expenses. Only one university has a residential campus, so students must use their stipend to find cheap housing on the local market.

¶6. According to Chandrarathne Vithanage, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Education at the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, Sri Lankan students do not want to see more private schools in Sri Lanka because they fear private school graduates will be preferred by employers, making their degrees less valuable. A Universities Act was drafted in 2001 to liberalize and improve the university system, but was protested so strongly by university students that the then-UNP led government, a party that typically supports privatization, sat on the legislation and never passed it.

----- Challenging Political Climate -----

¶7. Sri Lanka's political climate hinders education reform in other ways. University campuses are a microcosm of national political divisions. Student unions are backed by national political parties whose stranglehold on universities makes it difficult for the GSL to enact reforms. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is the most active political party at many universities and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-influenced student unions dominate Eastern University and the University of Jaffna.

Few Quality Opportunities in Private Education

¶18. More than 50 foreign universities operating in Sri Lanka are allowed to offer foreign degrees. However, according to the University Grants Commission, these programs are extremely expensive and most people cannot afford them. There is also no mechanism in place to evaluate the quality of private degrees offered in Sri Lanka. These universities currently operate under the Board of Investment, but a new regulatory commission may soon be established to evaluate the quality of services offered.

¶19. Many Sri Lankan students pursue professional certifications along with their university degrees. Professional certifications, particularly combined with a university degree, make graduates more competitive in the local job market. Students typically attend university classes during the week and private tutorial classes on the weekend. Unfortunately, these programs are not available in many rural areas.

Minimal U.S. Educational Presence in Sri Lanka

¶10. U.S. universities have a very small presence in Sri Lanka. Daniel Kelch, Programs Director at American National College in Colombo, affiliated with Northwood University, told EconOff that UK and Australian universities have a much larger presence in Sri Lanka, in part because their governments help fund expansion of

COLOMBO 00000025 003 OF 003

universities abroad and promotion of universities within the host countries. As a result, Sri Lankans have little exposure to the American educational culture and many are more comfortable with the British exam-based educational system. Kelch stressed that students who attend American schools are exposed to American values, tend to prefer American products and services, and are more likely to look to American companies for employment.

University Graduates Missing Key Skills

¶11. Vithanage told EconOff that university graduates in Sri Lanka lack "soft" skills such as leadership and communication skills. He said the university system does not teach students to think or show them how to apply knowledge. While some changes and reforms are taking place within the universities, private sector employers still prefer to hire foreign-educated students. The Chamber has recommended that the GSL allow state-owned universities to be more independent and autonomous, and that university vice chancellors be given the power to make changes to curriculum as needed and to raise private funds.

¶12. COMMENT: Within the government university system, even the students accepted into university receive only a moderately useful education. The perceptual gap between employers and the general population is alarming. Prospective university graduates enjoy the prestige that comes from making it into the state-run system, and fear that competition from private institutions will make them less competitive. In contrast, employers find that university graduates are poorly prepared for the business world, and that the graduates expect perks before demonstrating their value. Employers typically prefer students who have studied elsewhere. The way to address these deficiencies is to open up the system to private universities that can provide healthy competition and more opportunities for students. Unfortunately, with little public support for privatization and few funds available to modernize the current system, the vast majority of eligible students continue to be barred from university admission, and many who are admitted are not suited to today's business climate.

BLAKE